Approved For Release 2006/03/17 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000400100020-1

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam

25X1

Secret [redacted]

SNIE 53/14.3-75
27 March 1975

Copy Nº 371

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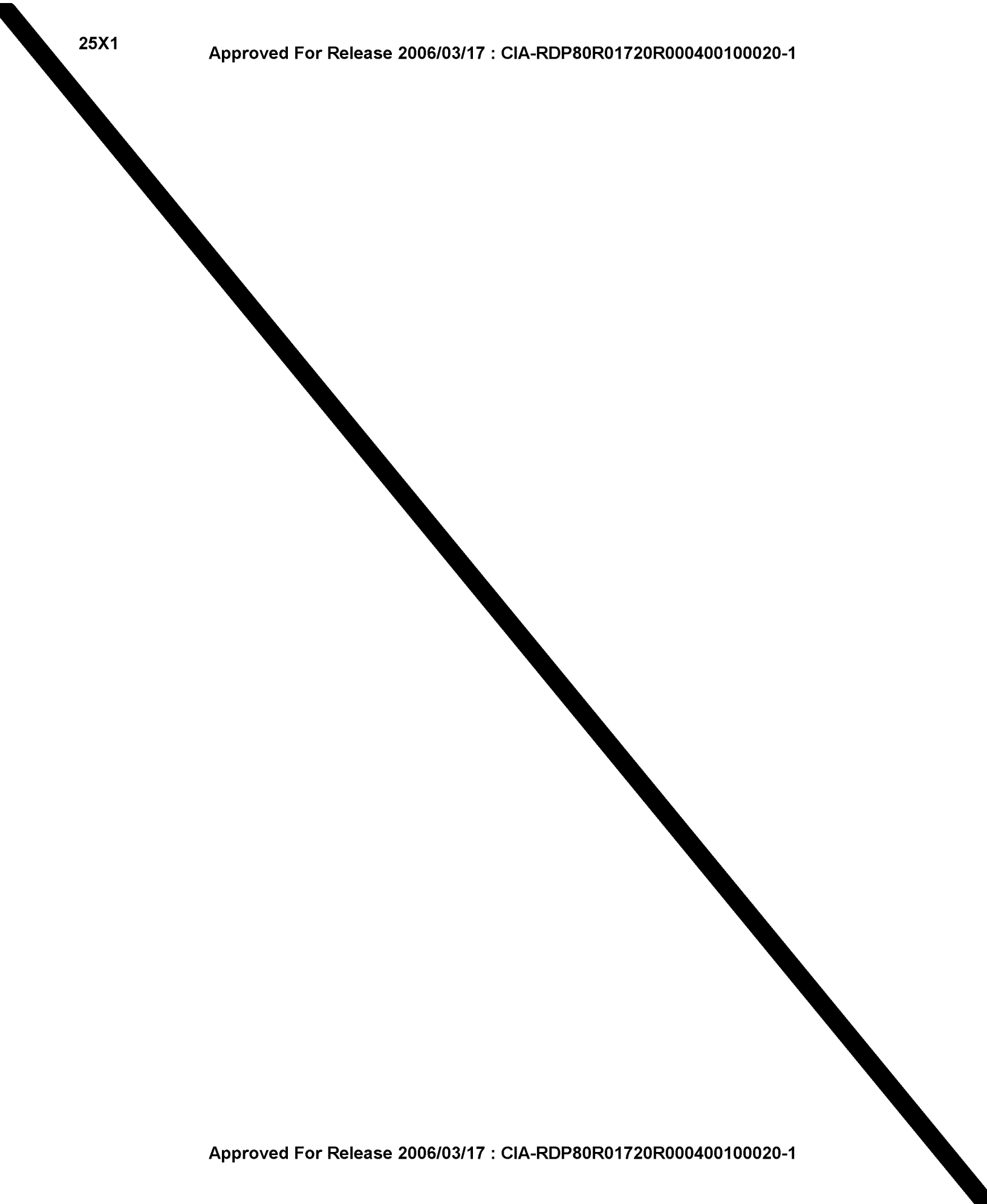

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ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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The Director of Intelligence and Research representing the Department of State

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ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

The situation in South Vietnam has rapidly deteriorated since President Thieu's decision in mid-March to shift to a strategy of military retrenchment. Following is an assessment of the situation and an analysis of South Vietnam's prospects for this dry season.

I. THE MILITARY SITUATION

The Northern Coast

1. The situation is especially bleak in MR 1. The government has conceded virtually the whole region to the communists, and South Vietnamese forces are now moving to an enclave around DaNang. The remnants of two of the four South Vietnamese divisions in MR 1 are scattered, and the communists are harassing them as they pull back toward DaNang. It is questionable if the bulk of these troops will reach DaNang, and the government will be hard pressed to defend the city without them. The communists, on the other hand, have two fresh divisions west of the city, and they are preparing to attack DaNang. In addition, the North Vietnamese 320B Division—one of Hanoi's five remaining reserve divisions—is moving south.

The Central Coast

2. The government's military position in MR 2 has also deteriorated rapidly. The South Vietnamese have abandoned five highland provinces and large parts of several others, and government troops do not appear to be capable of standing up to the communists. The South Vietnamese 23rd Division and two ranger groups were badly mauled in the fighting in Darlac Province, and five of the six ranger groups withdrawing from Kontum and Pleiku are in disarray. Large quantities of munitions and fuel were abandoned at Kontum and Pleiku cities. Communist attacks on the retreating column destroyed or damaged hundreds of pieces of equipment, and South Vietnamese troops abandoned large amounts of hardware along the road—all of which was needed to defend the coastal lowlands.

3. The North Vietnamese are far stronger than the remaining government forces and are in a position to deal a decisive blow in this region. The government has just over one effective division in MR 2, compared to five North Vietnamese divisions; moreover, large numbers of replacements have arrived in the highlands from North Vietnam. Nha

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Trang, the military headquarters for the region, is lightly defended and probably will fall.

The South

4. The fighting has eased somewhat north of Saigon, but the situation remains serious. The government is in the process of withdrawing from Binh Long Province and has had losses in western Binh Duong Province. The communists have thus far avoided a frontal assault on Tay Ninh City, but several communist divisions and independent regiments are pressing against government troops from three sides. Since the city will be costly to support and defend and most of the population has already fled, serious consideration is being given to abandoning this provincial capital and drawing new defensive lines in the southeastern portion of the province. In addition, recent communist gains east of Saigon have forced the GVN region commander to divert some troops from the Tay Ninh front and Saigon, and this has limited his capabilities to launch a counterattack north and west of the capital.

5. In the delta, the situation is, for the moment, relatively stable. Many of the communist main force units suffered heavy losses in the fighting around the turn of the year, but they are now rebuilding. This stable situation, however, could quickly change should Saigon move any sizable forces from the delta to bolster the defenses of MR 3.

II. THE IMPACT OF THIEU'S STRATEGY

6. Thieu decided to evacuate the highlands and concentrate his forces along the populated coast and around Saigon because he felt they were overextended, faced with a greatly superior North Vietnamese Army force, and confronted with the prospect of dwindling US aid. He clearly hoped to take the communists by surprise, extracting his forces intact and ready to fight before the communists could react. Thieu probably also calculated that by making his decision secretly and presenting it to his senior military commanders as a fait accompli he would forestall any coup plotting by them or a direct refusal to carry out his orders.

7. The result, however, was that Thieu took his own forces by surprise as much as he did the communists. His Joint General Staff and his regional commanders have all indicated that they had no prior briefing or consultation. US officials were also not notified. Without any prior planning or clear indication of the limits of the withdrawal, the redeployments have been generally disorderly. In the northern two-thirds of the country, most government forces are cut off from each other and seized with an evacuation mentality. Under these conditions some units have refused to fight.

8. The senior military leadership clearly has been caught off balance by the direction which events have taken, and their reaction has been one of dismay and depression. These attitudes also are reflected through the ranks.

9. Grumbling against Thieu's leadership has grown in the wake of military reverses, but events have moved so rapidly that there has been little coup talk. It is widely recognized that a coup at this time would be disastrous.* But the situation is such that pressures for Thieu's resignation or forcible removal could quickly emerge.

10. A source of disorder lies in the refugee problem which has caught the government ill-prepared to cope with the massive numbers of refugees generated in MRs 1 and 2. According to the latest estimates, there may now be upwards of a million displaced persons crowded into DaNang awaiting evacuation to coastal MR 2. But the government has inadequate resources to accomplish this mass evacuation in a short period, and there is a serious risk of riots and fighting in the rush to evacuate. Moreover, those who are brought out may have to be moved again—thereby creating additional pressures on the government.

11. Apart from the reverses suffered in South Vietnam, there are external factors which could further undermine the GVN. The collapse of Cambodia, for example, would bring added psychologi-

*The GVN move on March 27 to arrest "plotters" against the government was basically a warning to opposition elements; those involved did not represent any serious threat to Thieu.

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cal pressure on Saigon. The continuing debate in the US on the question of US aid to South Vietnam is also an unsettling factor. Thieu probably assumes that he will have to rely on what he already has; but if the South Vietnamese in general come to believe that the US will not respond with additional assistance to meet the new situation, this will fuel defeatism.

III. PROSPECTS

12. The communists have the capability to exploit their gains, and we believe they will. In so doing, they will try to destroy the remaining government forces in MRs 1 and 2. At the moment, the situation in DaNang is chaotic. Considering the forces that North Vietnam can bring to bear against DaNang, the poor state of government defenses there, and the widespread panic in the city, its defenses could simply collapse. In any event, it will be lost within two weeks to a North Vietnamese attack, perhaps within a few days if the Marine division is removed. Thieu is already considering this move; his strategy has been to save his forces from being destroyed in overextended positions.

13. In MR 2, the thinly stretched government forces will be no match for the five North Vietnamese divisions. There are already indications that the communists are planning to attack several major population centers in the region. In the face of strong communist attacks, the South Vietnamese will be unable to maintain these enclaves.

14. In MRs 3 and 4, the government currently has a substantial edge in forces and is expected to maintain a strong defense line around the heavily populated and rice growing areas, but some retraction of defenses is probable. Tay Ninh City has been a major goal of the communists this dry season. The South Vietnamese have fought hard to hold the city thus far, and we believe they can continue to do so, although they may decide to abandon it because of the risks and costs involved in defending it.

15. In sum, the South Vietnamese withdrawals amount to a major defeat. As matters now stand, Thieu is faced with:

- — re-asserting effective control over his commanders;
- — extracting key force elements and equipment from MRs 1 and 2; and
- — organizing a strong defense of the Saigon area and MR 4.

Communist momentum, however, will be hard to stop, and the North Vietnamese may be tempted to commit the remaining portion of their strategic reserve to exploit the situation. Even if they do so, we believe that the GVN's military strength in the southern part of the country will enable it to survive the current dry season, although additional losses are certain.

16. Logistic factors, for example, would probably bar a quick assault on Saigon since the communists now lack supply stocks in forward positions in MR 3 and their prepositioning will be time consuming. In addition, even the decision to commit the strategic reserve means that forces will have to be marshalled and deployed. In so doing, the communists will run into time and distance factors, and the complexities of assembling units and moving them over long lines of communication in an environment where rapid or orderly deployment is inhibited. Finally, the South Vietnamese forces in MRs 3 and 4—including the territorial forces—remain intact and able to give a good account of themselves.

17. Even so, the GVN will probably be left with control over little more than the delta and Saigon and surrounding populated areas. It would thus face further communist pressure from a position substantially weaker than our previous estimates, with the result likely to be defeat by early 1976. The communists will keep up their military pressure to topple the GVN by outright defeat unless there have been political changes in Saigon that open the way to a new settlement on near-surrender terms.

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Approved For Release 2006/03/17 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000400100020-1